



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

**AUDIT COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS**

**THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2020, ROOM 21, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,  
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

Present: Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson  
Andrew Muir MLA, Deputy Chairperson  
Emma Sheerin MLA

Apologies: Joanne Bunting MLA  
Alan Chambers MLA

In Attendance: Shane McAteer, Assembly Clerk  
Clairita Frazer, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Aoibheann Baker, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Jim Nulty, Clerical Supervisor  
Gareth Cross, Clerical Officer

*Members agreed that agenda item 1 will be held in closed session.*

*The meeting commenced at 10.13am in closed session.*

**1. Procedures and Administrative Arrangements**

Members noted the following guidance documents;

- 1.1 Committee Membership;
- 1.2 Staff contact details;
- 1.3 Arrangements for Committee meetings;

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that future meetings of the Audit Committee will be scheduled on a Wednesday at 1pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings. This decision

was taken in light of competing commitments identified by the members present in relation to Wednesday mornings and afternoons.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that modest refreshments will be provided for Committee meetings. A working lunch will be provided when appropriate.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that future meetings of the Committee will generally be held in public session unless individual agenda items require to be held in closed session due to the nature of business being considered.

1.4 Guide to the Powers and Operation of Standing Committees and Ad Hoc Committees for Chairpersons and Members;

The Chairperson drew members' specific attention to the guidance on privilege and matters of sub-judice contained within the "Guide to the Powers and Operation of Standing Committees and Ad Hoc Committees for Chairpersons and Members".

1.5 Guide to the Role of the Committee Chairperson;

1.6 Guide to the Role and Functions of Committee Office;

1.7 Committee Protocol on conduct and courtesy in Committee meetings;

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to adopt a protocol on conduct and courtesy in Committee meetings.

1.8 Committee approach to meeting preparation and questioning;

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to revisit options for meeting preparation and questioning at a later date as part of the Committee's strategic planning work.

1.9 Committee approach to dealing with correspondence; and

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to adopt a Committee approach to dealing with correspondence, with the provision for its use in the Audit Committee to be reviewed at a later date.

1.10 Timescales for Interaction between Assembly Committees and Departments.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that Committee staff will liaise with officials from both the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) and the office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) to identify aspects and principles of the "Guidance on Timescales for Interactions between Committees and Departments" which could be applied in the context of the Audit Committee.

The Committee noted a preparation sheet in relation to agenda items 5 & 6.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that questions not covered during today's evidence session would be forwarded to the NIAO and NIPSO for written response in advance of the Committee's next meeting.

*The meeting moved into open session at 10.36am.*

## **2. Apologies**

As above.

## **3. Declaration of Interests**

The Chairperson advised members of the requirement to register relevant financial and other interests in the Register of Members' Interests.

Members were further advised of the ongoing requirement to declare relevant financial or other interests as and when they arise on the Committee. In that regard, members were advised that any financial or other interests which relate to the remit of the Committee, or which are likely to be relevant to a substantial part of its work, should be drawn to the attention of the Committee at this stage.

Andrew Muir declared an interest as a former employee of Translink and former Member of Ards and North Down Borough Council.

*The meeting moved into open session at 10.36am*

## **4. Functions of the Audit Committee**

Members received a briefing from the Committee Secretariat on the functions of the Audit Committee.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that it will follow the protocols/methodologies used by the previous Audit Committee in relation to agreeing the annual budgets and estimates on the three non-Ministerial bodies for the 2020-21 financial cycle. A review will then be carried out, taking lessons learnt into consideration for the next financial year.

The Committee noted that the first meeting of the NIAC would not be taking place until Wednesday 19 February 2020 and, therefore, NIAC officials would not be in apposition to brief the Committee until after that date.

## **5. NIAO – Background briefing on draft Budget Plan 2020-21**

The Chairperson welcomed the following NIAO officials to the meeting and invited them to brief the Committee:

- Kieran Donnelly, Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG);
- Pamela McCreedy, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO; and
- Rodney Allen, Director of Corporate Services, NIAO.

Mr McCrossan declared an interest as a former Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee in the previous mandate.

The session was recorded by Hansard.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee probed NIAO officials on a range of issues, including: NIAO's strategic plan and resourcing and budget issues; the Audit Office Business Transformation Programme; the legal constitution for the position of the C&AG; Main Estimates for 2020-21; and the NIAO accommodation project.

The NIAO officials agreed to provide follow up information as requested.

## **6. NIPSO - Background briefing on draft Budget Plan 2020-21**

The Chairperson welcomed the following NIPSO officials to the meeting and invited them to brief:

- Paul McFadden, (Nominated) Acting NIPSO; and
- John McGinnity, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, NIPSO.

The session was recorded by Hansard.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee probed NIPSO officials on a range of issues including: NIPSO's strategic plan and resourcing and budget issues; implications of the current NIPSO vacancy; projected increases in the number of complaints; and the 2020-21 budget plan.

The NIPSO officials agreed to provide follow up information as requested.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to NIAC requesting an updated timetable for the recruitment of the Northern Ireland Assembly Ombudsman.

## **7. Next Steps in 2020-21 Budget Process**

Members received a briefing from the Committee Secretariat on the next steps for its scrutiny of the draft 2020-21 Budget plans for the three non-Ministerial Bodies.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to proceed with its scrutiny in order to submit its final position to the Department of Finance in relation to the draft Budget Plans 20/21 ahead of finalisation of the Executive Budget plan before 11 March. This final position would be laid in the Assembly Business Office and published on the Committee's webpages. The Committee *further agreed* that the next meeting will take place on 4 March 2020 at 1pm in light of the time constraints for a Committee position to be agreed on Budget 2020-21 for the three non-Ministerial bodies.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek the view of the Department of Finance on the budgetary positions of the three non-Ministerial bodies in accordance with the applicable protocols and seek the views of the Public Accounts Committee on the budgetary plan of the Northern Ireland Audit Office for 2020-21.

## **8. Draft Induction Plan and arrangements for Strategic Planning Meeting**

Members received a briefing from the Committee Secretariat on the draft Committee Induction Plan, which included arrangements for a strategic planning meeting.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the proposed Induction Plan, including the organisation of an informal session on the Public Finance Framework delivered by the Assembly Research and Information Service.

## **9. Potential topics on Forward Work Programme**

Members received a briefing from the Committee Secretariat on the potential topics for the Committee's forward work programme. The briefing included issues considered by previous Committees in the 2016-17 and 2011-16 mandates, which may still be topical.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to commission a research paper on "*Topical issues in other legislatures*"; to further its consideration of strategic priorities and to schedule the research briefing for the Committee's third meeting.

## **10. Correspondence**

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

10.1 Correspondence from an anonymous correspondent in regards to the NIAO.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Public Accounts Committee in light of its role and remit and to obtain advice to inform a response to the anonymous correspondent.

Members noted that separate correspondence relating to NIAO had been sent recently to the Committee, which will be considered at a future meeting and in light of further advice.

## **11. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 4 March 2020 at 1pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

*The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.15pm*

**Daniel McCrossan MLA**  
**Chairperson**  
**Audit Committee**